U.S. Department of Energy
Plain Writing Act Compliance Report
April 15, 2021

I. Introduction

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) views the implementation of the Plain Writing Act as an important initiative that helps the Department share relevant information clearly, concisely, and informatively. The areas referenced in this report summarize some of our successes as we continue to emphasize writing in Plain Language.

II. DOE Plain Writing Officials

A. Ingrid Kolb, Director of the Office of Management, Senior Agency Official Responsible for Plain Writing

B. Michael Coogan, Office of the Executive Secretariat, Plain Language Point-of-Contact

III. Examples of Agency Website Communications Available in a Format Consistent with the Plain Language Guidelines

A. *[Office of Public Affairs (PA)](#)*. The Office of Public Affairs manages DOE's public website – [Energy.gov](#). The office has consolidated more than 50 of DOE's staff and program offices from separate websites onto Energy.gov. This consolidation allows visitors to enter a search term and find their information on Energy.gov; previously, relevant information was scattered across many stand-alone DOE program and office websites not searchable from Energy.gov.

Energy.gov represents PA's commitment to principles of open government and Plain Language in several ways, including:

- *[News, Blogs, and Articles](#).* The blog section highlights timely content featuring many exciting innovations across DOE, from program offices to the National Laboratories. [Energy.gov](#) blogs and articles provide Plain Language summaries of complex scientific processes and discoveries in a conversational style for the public. Writers develop interactive content, such as timelines and quizzes, to explain topical energy concepts to the public.

- *Training.* Contributors to [Energy.gov](#) are encouraged to follow the principles of Plain Language in the webpages they maintain. They receive content

guidelines and training on using Plain Language and following web best practices for making content accessible. In addition, Energy.gov offers [blog writing and social media guidance](#) to help offices develop easy-to-understand content.

- *Accessibility.* PA helped evaluate and implement a Section 508 tool called SiteImprove. This tool helps Energy.gov content owners identify broken links, misspellings, grammatical errors, and other accessibility/usability issues.

- *Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools*. PA provides Google Analytics training to other DOE offices. This training helps content owners understand important metrics, such as website visitor trends, behavior, and keyword searches within the internal website and external search engines such as Google. Offices use these metrics to guide their digital strategy and ensure content is reaching target audiences. Using Google Webmaster Tools and Google Analytics, PA has found most user search queries consist of terms that are simple and in Plain Language.

- *Podcast.* PA's podcast, [Direct Current](#), shares engaging, conversational stories about how DOE and the National Laboratories are making a positive difference for millions of Americans. Direct Current's format is similar to National Public Radio, which hailed it as ["more ambitious"](#) than other government podcasts. To date, PA has aired more than [40 episodes](#), each with corresponding transcripts and supplemental content.

- *Social Media.* PA also uses Plain Language on social media, converting complex, scientific information into easy-to-understand, bite-sized messages. PA manages several agency-level social media platforms, including the [@Energy](#) Twitter account, which now has more than 780,000 followers; Facebook (over 146,000); and LinkedIn (over 109,000). Instagram, which uses eye-catching photos and videos to tell the story of science and technology supported by the Department of Energy, has over 103,000 followers.

B. [*U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA)*](#). EIA staff developed and offered an in-house writing curriculum – a series of eight writing courses aptly named *Write Right.* In 2020, EIA trained 149 Federal employees and contractors under *Write Right*. Employees who attend these courses improve their Plain Language skills – punctuation, grammar, proofreading, and conciseness – and learn more about common writing mistakes and how to plan and revise their work. Each course is customized with EIA-relevant hands-on writing activities and EIA writing samples, and focused on areas where writers and their managers need to improve.

- In 2020, EIA offered a virtual one-hour course in the *Write Right* curriculum called "Ten Tips to Improve Your Writing." The course topics:

— Plan your document
— Write freely
— Revise and edit your work
— Follow Plain Language guidelines
— Use active voice
— Avoid false subjects
— Limit jargon and acronyms
— Use bulleted or numbered lists
— Write effective titles and headings
— Eliminate unnecessary words and noun phrases

The *Write Right* curriculum is successful because EIA has made a serious commitment – in time, money, and enthusiasm – to helping staff write more effectively. As one senior manager said, "We've definitely sent a signal that the agency is taking writing quite seriously and considers it a top priority." EIA has new writing and editing classes planned in 2021 that place more emphasis on scientific-style writing and the recent release of its revised 2021 *EIA Writing Style Guide*.

From its nearly 70 reports published in 2020 on energy topics, EIA used Plain Language principles consistently throughout all web content, including its three annual flagship reports – the *Annual Energy Outlook, International Energy Outlook*, and the *Summer Fuels Outlook*. The related infographics and social media campaigns highlighted notable and meaningful energy and forecasting data for visitors in simple and clear terms.

EIA's YouTube channel features short how-to videos about EIA surveys and forms, short clips on featured topics, informational videos on data tools and how to use them, webinars on pressing energy issues, and product launch events with private sector partners, such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

EIA's website contains education materials reflecting Plain Language principles, including:

- Today in Energy. These short articles use Plain Language along with graphics, photos, maps, and animations to educate the public on timely energy issues, topics, and trends. Every business day, EIA provides bite-sized pieces of information that readers can use in business, government, schools, and their personal lives. Energy experts explain topical data, reports, issues, and trends to build the public's understanding of energy issues.

- Energy Kids. This student-friendly website provides opportunities – through information and activities – to learn about energy while improving research

and reading skills. The teacher guide provides activities for teachers who use Energy Kids as a resource to teach students about energy in a fun and interactive way.

- Energy Explained. This extensive resource describes the different sources and uses of energy in understandable, everyday language. EIA updated more than 158 Energy Explained pages in 2020. In addition, EIA redesigned its Energy Explained resource to include enhanced navigation features, a more user-friendly interface, interactive data visualizations, and more.

- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). This EIA resource provides answers in Plain Language to sometimes complicated questions about energy asked by the public and other stakeholders through EIA's website, Twitter, and Facebook. EIA frequently updates the FAQ page to include the most current information and most popular inquiries. EIA updated all 99 FAQs in 2020.

- Glossary. Because EIA's content can be very technical, EIA maintains an extensive glossary of terms that EIA authors can use to hyperlink technical terms for readers who want more detailed explanations. The glossary is also a searchable tool web users can easily find on EIA.gov.

EIA maintains several data tools to make browsing EIA data interactive and easy for users. In 2020, EIA launched the new U.S. Energy Atlas, a comprehensive reference for data and interactive maps of energy infrastructure and resources in the United States.

EIA is active on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn, and YouTube. EIA uses social media to promote *Today in Energy* stories and newly published reports and analyses. EIA uses social media to connect consumers with useful EIA tools, such as the U.S. Electric System Operating Data tool, the Status of U.S. Nuclear Outages page, and the Flood Vulnerability Assessment Map.

EIA continues to enhance its ability to respond to electricity emergencies with the Energy Disruptions web page, hurricane status reports, and related *Today in Energy* articles that provide information on a storm's potential to disrupt the energy system and analyses of the resulting impacts after landfall.

C. *Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy (EERE)*. EERE manages its popular main website along with its consumer favorite – Energy Saver.gov. In 2020, EERE's content was about seven percent of Energy.gov content but represented about 30 percent of all page views.

Some 2020 highlights:

- The Alternative Fuel Data Center's alternative fuel station locator was EERE's most visited page.

- Users logged more than 30.5 million page views, a 14 percent increase over 2019 (26.6 million).

EERE websites contain a number of features reflecting Plain Language guidelines, including:

- [The EERE Publications and Product Library](). This library includes search terms and searches by category that are simple and easy to use to find publications by topic.

- [EERE Success Stories](). The stories feature the positive impact of EERE's work with businesses, industry partners, universities, research labs, and other entities.

- [EERE Blog](). This blog discusses energy topics and technologies in a conversational tone, including some first-person accounts of saving energy.

- *[How Do Wind Turbines Work]?* This popular EERE web page provides an easy-to-understand explanation of how wind turbines operate and defines technical terms in Plain Language.

- Social Media Posts. EERE manages 15 social media accounts and blogs. In 2020, EERE's three main social media accounts had a total audience of more than 250,000 followers. Our three main channels – including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn – gained about 10,200 new followers in 2020, due in part to their simplified and conversational-style language and engaging graphics and photos.

- Infographics. EERE condenses highly technical information about clean energy topics into simple infographics used for multiple purposes, including social media posts, reports, and web pages.

EERE co-chairs the DOE Web Council, which meets monthly to address common issues, including Plain Language Act compliance. EERE offices and programs are also represented in the group. The Web Council co-chair promoted EERE's [Communication Standards]() website that includes guidelines for content writers and editors and a [section explaining the Plain Writing Act]() and its requirements. The Communication Standards section also includes EERE's style guide and guidelines on ensuring that content is accessible to those with disabilities.

EERE's Product Governance Team, which includes subject matter experts from EERE technology and program offices, as well as Department of Energy national laboratories, reviews products. If deeper review is necessary, the team convenes to ensure the product adheres to EERE's branding, and formatting policies are easy to understand. Digital versions of all approved printed materials are in EERE's Online Publications Library to allow easy public access.

EERE provides a large assortment of Adobe InDesign templates for internal users to develop high-quality printed materials and presentations. These templates are in a variety of formats, including fact sheets, scientific and technical reports, pamphlets, and handouts. These templates include an additional pink-colored layer, which may be toggled on and off, that provides developers guidance on writing including Plain Language references. EERE also provides PowerPoint templates.

In addition, team leads for EERE's public correspondence and websites encourage writers of public correspondence and web content throughout EERE to take DOE's Plain Language training courses. Team leads forward opportunities for Plain Language training to EERE web coordinators, including an opportunity through Digital.gov and plainlanguage.gov entitled, "Plain Language: Accessibility for Content."

To address common queries from the public, the public correspondence team developed Plain Language responses that are consistent, follow best practices, and are aligned with Federal policy. These prewritten replies expedite DOE's responses to consumers.

D. *National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA)*. The NNSA is a semi-autonomous agency within the Department of Energy, responsible for enhancing national security through the military application of nuclear science. NNSA maintains multiple websites that follow Plain Language principles. NNSA's primary website – Energy.gov/nnsa – is regularly updated with press releases, articles, infographics, animations and videos, newsletters, fact sheets, and other documents. This information highlights NNSA's mission and activities, including areas such as stockpile stewardship and nuclear nonproliferation. The website also provides information on NNSA careers and structure, and links to NNSA's social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Flickr).

NNSA also maintains a Directives website that serves as a content and document management system for policies and procedures. This public website allows users to access and organize the Department's Technical Standards and other information simply and quickly.

NNSA's websites reflect Plain Language principles that give the public a better understanding of NNSA's programs, such as:

- Prevent, Counter, and Respond – A Strategic Plan to Reduce Global Nuclear Threats. This report describes NNSA's planning and program activities on U.S. national security and advance global nuclear security. The report uses Plain Language principles to clearly define and describe its missions to prevent, counter, and respond to the threats of nuclear proliferation and terrorism.

- **Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan.** This report describes NNSA's efforts to maintain and modernize scientific tools, capabilities, and infrastructure to ensure the success of NNSA's nuclear weapons mission.

- **Fact sheets.** NNSA produces numerous fact sheets that outline its weapon life extension programs, important missions, other important public-facing documents, and material for the media. The fact sheets follow Plain Language principles.

- **Top 10.** This page provides users with the ten most frequently accessed policies and directives from the preceding month.

E. ***The Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO)***. Information and technology help DOE meet its mission in energy, science, and nuclear security. The OCIO's programs span all these areas.

The OCIO also maintains the Department's internal Powerpedia wiki, which has a section educating staff on how to use Plain Language (see V.B). The OCIO uses Plain Language to convey technical and operational concepts.

IV. Examples of Other Agency Communications Consistent with the Plain Language Guidelines

Office of the Executive Secretariat. The Office of the Executive Secretariat oversees Secretarial correspondence and most DOE Congressional Reports. The office provides DOE guidance on these documents consistent with the Plain Writing Act and reviews documents for consistency with the Act's guidelines.

V. Informing Agency Staff of the Plain Writing Act's Requirements

A. DOE's website contains links to the agency's previous *Plain Writing Act Compliance Reports* in its Open.Gov section.

B. The Department's internal wiki – Powerpedia – has a Plain Language page. Through the wiki, DOE lists resources and information, including:

- Embedded YouTube videos from the Plain Language Action Information Network that highlight best practices for clear writing.

- Training schedules for Plain Language classes.

- Guidelines and links for writing in Plain Language.

- Before and after Plain Language examples.

VI. Training

Plain Language training has been a staple at DOE since 2011. Initially directed toward its headquarters personnel in the District and Germantown, Maryland, training for employees and contractors expanded in 2013 to the Department's laboratories and field offices across the country via video conferencing. In 2014, Plain Language training expanded further when laboratories and field offices requested in-person instruction. All classes are led by an in-house agency instructor.

DOE personnel have fully embraced Plain Language training. The Department holds classes for employees and contractors in groups of 20-30, as well as DOE Program Offices when they request training as a group.

Because of public health concerns, there was no Plain Language training from April 2020 to March 2021. Several in-person classes initially scheduled throughout 2020 were repeatedly postponed. However, 45-minute overviews of DOE's Plain Language training were presented remotely to both the Office of Science Communications team and the Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy BioComms team.

A better indicator of Plain Language training at DOE is reflected in the training specifics for the previous year, from April 2019 to March 2020:

	Classes	**Participants**
Forrestal*	8	187
Germantown	2	57
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Phoenix**	2	27
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Salt Lake City**	1	19
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Lakewood, CO**	1	31
In-Person Instruction at the WAPA site in Loveland, CO**	1	21
TOTAL	**15**	**342**

* *The National Nuclear Security Administration requested two classes.*

** *The Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) specifically requested this class.*

At both its DC headquarters and Germantown facility, the Department sends a broadcast email message to all employees and contractors promoting Plain Language training and generating awareness. At Department sites across the country, points-of-contact promote Plain Language training.

DOE's Plain Language classes provide tools that allow writers to present information more clearly, including:

- Using active voice

- Using pronouns and everyday words

- Shortening sentences and paragraphs

- Limiting jargon and acronyms

- Identifying the audience

- Focusing not on what you want to say, but what the reader needs to know

- Using lists (bullets, numbers, letters) and tables instead of long-form paragraphs

- Making your document easier to read

VII. Ongoing Compliance/Sustaining Change

A. All DOE employees and contractors are encouraged to incorporate Plain Language principles in their writing. Some Program Offices have developed style guides that support Plain Language concepts (EIA's *Writing Style Guide* is one example). Some offices, such as the OCIO and EIA, also integrate Plain Language concepts into their document review process.

The Office of the Executive Secretariat incorporates Plain Language standards in its review of DOE documents and external correspondence and works with Program Offices to emphasize Plain Language principles.

B. The Department's Powerpedia internal wiki has an Acronyms List that identifies Department-related acronyms for readers and provides the acronym's description.

C. Plain Language training is ongoing for DC headquarters, Germantown, and field facilities.

VIII. DOE Plain Writing Websites/Links

A. DOE's Plain Language website

B. The Plain Language Page on Powerpedia,[1] DOE's internal wiki site

C. DOE's link on its Plain Language website to Federal Plain Language Guidelines

D. DOE's link on its Plain Language website to the Plain Language Action Information Network

E. EIA's Writing Style Guide and its one-page tip sheet

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[1] Accessible only to Department of Energy employees and contractors

IX. Customer Satisfaction Evaluation after Experiencing Plain Language Communications

A. DOE's Office of Public Affairs conducted (1) usability testing to assess and improve the experience of visitors on Energy.gov; and (2) an extensive analysis of search terms used by visitors to reach Energy.gov. As a follow-up to these studies, DOE launched a more responsive version of Energy.gov that adapts to the user's device, allowing DOE content to be easily viewed on tablets, smartphones, and other mobile devices.

The Department continues to monitor and optimize how Energy.gov is serving consumers, businesses, governments, educators, researchers, and the public. As DOE places increasing emphasis on mobile-friendly online content, Plain Language principles become more critical in meeting the agency's communications needs.

B. In March 2021, EIA released the first update of its *Writing Style Guide* since 2015. EIA's style guide has previously won a ClearMark Award from the Center for Plain Language. EIA's style guide is its central document for Plain Language, and employees use the guide for help and advice on the EIA writing style, grammar tips, and writing clearly. Many EIA employees also post the *Writing Style Guide's* tip sheet on their office walls and doors.

C. The attendance numbers for EIA's *Write Right* curriculum show that the courses are popular. Comments on the evaluation surveys indicate that participants found the training informative and useful.

EIA's annual web customer satisfaction survey conducted in August 2020 showed that 97 percent of 18,176 respondents indicated they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the quality of the information on EIA's website. Ninety-five percent of respondents indicated they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the design and navigation. This survey also collects information on who is visiting the website and the information they are seeking.

Other EIA product-specific surveys collect information on how customers use a particular product, if the customer finds it useful, and how EIA can improve it.

D. Two members of DOE's Plain Language Working Group served as judges for the Center for Plain Language's *2020 Federal Plain Language Report Card.* The judges brought their expertise and knowledge of Plain Language principles to the judging process, while taking away from their experience greater insight on how Federal Government websites can use Plain Language to more clearly convey their messages to the public.

E. Another member of DOE's Plain Language Working Group, for the third consecutive year, served as a judge for the Center for Plain Language's ClearMark Awards, which showcases the best in plain language communication.